

PROCEEDINGS  
OF THE  
CALIFORNIA ACADEMY OF SCIENCES  
FOURTH SERIES

VOL. VII, No. 2, pp. 33-35.

JULY 23, 1917

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II

CONCERNING THE ORIGIN OF THE SOFT-SHELLED  
TURTLE, *ASPIDONECTES CALIFORNIANA*  
RIVERS\*

BY JOHN VAN DENBURGH

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In the Proceedings of the California Academy of Sciences, Series 2, Vol. II, pp. 233-236, December 20, 1889, Mr. J. J. Rivers published a "Description of a New Turtle from the Sacramento River, belonging to the Family of Trionychidæ." The supposed new species was named *Aspidonectes californiana*. The description was largely prepared by Dr. George Baur, who compared this turtle with *A. spinifer* and *A. emoryi*. Mr. Rivers stated that his turtle "was captured in the Sacramento River, near the city of Sacramento, by a party of gentlemen engaged in fishing, their names being Messrs. W. J. Terry, H. B. Denson and J. C. Jones."

I have tried to learn what I could regarding the real history of this turtle, but have gotten little definite information. Dr. Terry has stated to me that he had nothing to do with the turtle except that he suggested to his friend that it should be sent to the University of California. He says that this friend (Mr. J. Charles Jones) got the turtle from a French restaurant

\* Printed from the John W. Hendrie Publication Endowment.

July 23, 1917

in Sacramento and that this restaurant was near China Slough which was a backwater emptying into and filled from the Sacramento River.

Mr. J. Charles Jones referred me to the former owner of the restaurant, Mrs. Louis Payen, then living in Latrobe, El Dorado County, California. She writes under date June 5, 1905:

"I can give you very little information about a certain turtle. I cannot remember ever having one of that kind in our possession, but Mr. Payen remembers that some boys had one soft-shell turtle in the street on H between 20 and 21st, front of a saloon. He thinks he was over a foot long, and the first soft-shell turtle he ever saw, and the boys said they got him in the slough near Chinatown, and Mr. Payen does not know what became of him.

"We sold our restaurant in 1889 and went to France. In returning we moved to 22d St., I and J, and it was after that that Mr. Payen saw the turtle, but he does not know how soon after, but is positive it was not before Jan., 1890."

Dr. Baur wrote me that he had compared the skeleton of Rivers' specimen with that of *P. sinensis* and found that the two did not belong to the same species. Notwithstanding this, in 1897, I regarded this turtle as probably of Chinese origin, for the skeleton to which Baur referred (except perhaps the skull) was prepared not from the original specimen, but from one of a number of specimens purchased in Chinatown in San Francisco for Mr. Rivers by Mr. W. G. Harford, who at that time was associated with Mr. Rivers in the Museum of the University of California. Regarding these specimens, Mr. Harford wrote me, as follows:—

Alameda, April 19, 1908.

John Van Denburgh, M. D.

Dear Friend:—

Relative to the soft-shelled reptile from the Sacramento River, described by Prof. Rivers, I can only state from memory, the following:—On visiting the Chinese grocery at the corner of Dupont and Sacramento Streets, [San Francisco] I

found in a vat of fresh water several live specimens of what seemed to me at the time to be identical with the species described by Prof. Rivers. On returning to Berkeley, I reported to Mr. R. what I had seen in the city, at this Chinese grocery, and he rather doubted it at the time as being the same species he had described from the Sacramento River. Prof. R. determined to secure these specimens from the city for the Museum of the University; which he did, and we had them alive in the sink for a number of days (in fresh water) in the museum rooms. On opening the rooms in the morning we usually found them on the floor, having crawled out of the sink. My recollection as to the number of them is not quite clear, but I remember we had at least three, one of which was considerably larger than the others. I asked the merchant where they came from. He said China. Any questions you would like to ask I will gladly answer. I will try to see you at an early date.

Yours truly,

(Signed) "W. G. Harford."

While these statements made from memory by the people concerned many years after the events to which they refer may not be in all respects accurate, they seem to make it almost certain that all of these turtles were brought over from China. There seems to be no evidence in support of Rivers' statement that the type was caught in the Sacramento River itself, although it may have been found in the backwater known as China Slough, near the Chinatown of Sacramento. It, doubtless, had been imported by the Chinese, just as had the other specimens found later in San Francisco. There is absolutely no evidence of the occurrence of a soft-shelled turtle in any of the waters of California.